

Vandalism and the Older Adult

Smashed mailboxes, graffiti, “keyed” automobiles, broken windows, and similar crimes are not just an eyesore. Property crimes, which include vandalism, cost schools, homeowners, businesses, youth, and others billions of dollars each year. Vandalism is the willful or malicious destruction, injury, disfigurement, or defacement of any public or private property, without the consent of the owner. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, about 4.4% of the nation’s households—5.1 million homes—were the target of vandalism in 2005 (*Crime and the Nation’s Households*, April 2007). Figures from cities across the U.S. suggest that annual graffiti cleanup alone costs each taxpayer about \$1 to \$3—total of about \$139 million (Graffiti Hurts).

The Scope of the Problem

According to Gallup’s annual Crime Poll, 14% of those surveyed reported that a home, car, or other property belonging to them or another household member had been vandalized in 2010. (*The Gallup Poll*, October 2010)

Only 40% of property crimes were reported to the police in 2009. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization*, 2008, 2009)

In 2009, of the 7,789 reported hate crimes (an offense motivated by racial or ethnic bias), more than 31% were acts of vandalism.

Older People and Vandalism

62.4 of every 1,000 household headed by an adult age 65 or older fell victim to property crime, including vandalism, in 2008. (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States*, 2008, March 2010)

According to the National Institute of Justice, neighborhood physical conditions, such as vandalism and graffiti, contribute to resident concerns for personal safety and their desire to leave their neighborhood. (*Impacts of Specific Incivilities on Responses to Crime and Local Commitment*, 1979-1994)

Vandalism and Hatred

In 2009, 31.6% of hate crimes involved destruction/damage of property/vandalism. Of all (violent and property) single-bias incidents, 48.5% were motivated by racial bias, 19.7% resulted from religious bias, 18.5% were linked to sexual-orientation bias, and 1.5% involved physical or mental disability bias. (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009 Hate Crime Statistics)

Among the anti-Semitic incidents reported in 2008 were 702 cases of vandalism. Most involved acts in which Jewish schools, synagogues, and cemeteries were defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti. (Anti-Defamation League, “2008 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents”)

Of all incidents involving religious bias, anti-Muslim hate crimes rose from 7.7% in 2008 to 9.3% in 2009. (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009 Hate Crime Statistics)

Juveniles and Vandalism

In 2008, an estimated 107,300 juveniles were arrested for committing acts of vandalism. Overall, juveniles made up approximately 38% of vandalism arrests. 40% of all minors arrested were younger than 15. (Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Juvenile Arrests 2008*, December 2009)

Females made up 13% of all juvenile arrests for vandalism in 2008. (Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Juvenile Arrests 2008*, December 2009)

Nationally, about 10% of graffiti is gang-related. However, in some cities, the percentage is estimated to be higher. (Graffiti Hurts)

Based on law enforcement reports, there were an estimated 731,000 gang members throughout 3,500 jurisdictions nationwide in 2009. (National Gang Center, *2009 National Youth Gang Survey*)

Juveniles are more likely to commit crimes in groups and are more likely to be arrested than are adults. (Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Juvenile Arrests 2008*, December 2009)

Between 1999 and 2008, arrest rates for juvenile males committing acts of vandalism decreased 8%, while the rate for females increased 3%. Overall, arrests for vandalism decreased 4% between 2007 and 2008. (Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Juvenile Arrests 2008*, December 2009)

A study by the Consortium for Political and Social Research draws a strong correlation between social disorder (teen vagrancy and vandalism) and residential fear of crime, victimization, and negative neighborhood perceptions (*Evaluation of the Impact of Innovative Policing Programs on Social Disorder in Seven Cities in the United States, 1983-1990*).

Reasons for Vandalism

According to the Urban Institute/City Safe, vandalism is not a senseless property crime. Perpetrators, acting alone or in groups, vandalize for many reasons—ranging from gang acceptance to revenge. Other common motivators include:

- ★ Desire to fit in
- ★ To please a friend
- ★ Parent retribution/defiance
- ★ Backlash to pressures at home/work/school
- ★ Peer pressure/acceptance
- ★ For fun
- ★ To convey a message
- ★ To counter low self-esteem
- ★ Identify turf or territory (gang related)
- ★ Anger/revenge
- ★ Boredom

Countering Vandalism

- ★ Stay active in your community to feel safer and to make your neighborhood safer.
- ★ Train citizens to recognize and report suspicious and criminal activities in their neighborhood.
- ★ Join a Neighborhood/Apartment/Window/Business Watch, Triad, or Citizen Patrol.
- ★ Report broken street lights and lobby local government for better public lighting.
- ★ Start a clean-up crew. Ask local businesses to donate supplies for covering graffiti, or tools and equipment for repairing vandalized property.
- ★ Clean up graffiti quickly. According to Graffiti Hurts, immediate removal—within 24 to 48 hours—is key to successful graffiti prevention.
- ★ Write articles on the cost of vandalism and graffiti, their impact on neighborhoods and school, and how the courts—juvenile and adult—treat vandals.
- ★ Start a vandalism hotline in cooperation with law enforcement and school officials that lets callers anonymously report incidents of vandalism and gives tips.
- ★ Work with your community to adopt a street or park monthly. Clean up; plant trees, bushes, and flowers. Repair equipment and install trash containers.
- ★ Be a role model for youth by volunteering with mentoring organizations (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters). Visit www.volunteermatch.org to find opportunities in your area.
- ★ Read “Preventing Vandalism,” published by Urban Institute and its Safe City partners, to learn strategies for assessing and combating vandalism in your community (www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/1001192_preventing_vandalism.pdf)

Resources

Big Brothers Big Sisters

230 North 13th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19107
www.bbbs.org

Boys & Girls Clubs of America

1275 West Peachtree Street NE
Atlanta, GA 30309-3506
(404) 487-5700
info@bgca.org
www.bgca.org

Graffiti Hurts

(a grassroots community education program
developed by Keep America Beautiful, Inc.)
www.graffitihurts.org/

International Association of Property Crime Investigators

10685-B Hazelhurst Drive, #1503
Houston, TX 77043
(206) 339-1641
www.iapci.org

Keep America Beautiful, Inc.

1010 Washington Boulevard
Stamford, CT 06901
(203) 323-8987
Fax: (203) 325-9199
info@kab.org
www.kab.org

National Crime Prevention Council

2001 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 901
Arlington, VA 22202
(202) 466-6272
Fax: (202) 296-1356
www.ncpc.org

National Criminal Justice Reference Service Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse

PO Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000
(800) 851-3420
TTY: (877) 712-9279
Fax: (301) 519-5212
www.ncjrs.org

Urban Institute

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U.S. Department of Justice

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Office of Juvenile Justice and
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Washington, DC 20531
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